

The stimulus bill and protecting the ocean

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The House has passed the sweeping stimulus bill with your support. In your mind, were there any missed opportunities or flaws in the bill when it left the House for Senate deliberation? Do you foresee a need for further specific economic stimulus in another bill later this session?

As I write this column, the Senate is still debating the economic recovery legislation. After the senators pass their bill, I expect you'll see what's called a "conference committee" that will merge the House and Senate versions. Both chambers then vote on the final bill, which will be sent to the president's desk for signature.

I lay out that process because by the time you pick up this paper, we may already have a final bill-and it may look a lot different than it does today. I knew when I voted on the House bill it wasn't in final form. The Senate has different ideas and we knew there would be negotiations. That's how effective bills are created.

What I can say is that the government is stepping up to the plate during a time of crisis. No one said crafting an economic recovery policy would be easy. There are a whole lot of moving parts, a host of players and a variety of goals, many of which overlap. Unfortunately our crystal ball is no better than any other.

Look at the heart of our current financial crisis and you'll see three things: consumers afraid to open their wallets, banks nervous about lending money and businesses scared to invest. As the private sector loses steam, the government must step in to fill the gap or the cycle will worsen.

First and foremost, the economic growth plan will put America back to work. Millions of jobs have been lost and the news isn't getting any better. Unemployment in California is nearing 10 percent; unless we reverse this collapse, jobs will continue to disappear. The House and Senate

agree that this bill must create and save as many jobs as possible.

A second goal of the growth plan, closely linked to job creation, is infrastructure improvement. Many critics of early plans want to see even more funds for infrastructure projects, and I think that's a good thing. Building and renovating schools, repairing roads and bridges, shoring up levees, modernizing and greening our electric grid are just a few initiatives that not only create jobs but also leave behind tangible improvements for future economic growth.

Another function of the stimulus is to bolster the safety net for millions of Americans who have already lost their jobs. Some provisions have come under fire, but I feel these funds are not only necessary to help struggling families, they also serve to stimulate the economy.

With millions struggling to buy food, food stamps will not only feed families but also inject dollars into the economy. The same goes for health insurance. Funds to expand Medicare pump more money into the economy while at the same time keeping families insured.

Congress must shake things loose. Economists agree this will only happen through a broad economic stimulus package. These funds aren't for banks or car companies, they're being invested to put Americans to work, to improve our infrastructure and throw a lifeline to out-of-work Americans.

Keeping our economy afloat won't be easy, but it's a task Washington is set on achieving.

Scientists recently discovered elevated urea levels in Monterey Bay, pointing to a human cause for toxic algae blooms. Meanwhile, stricter stormwater runoff programs are giving cities and counties financial headaches in these lean times, with Santa Cruz County recently rejecting several water quality measures as too expensive and unnecessary. What can be done at a federal level to increase the standards for stormwater runoff without hamstringing local budgets?

I've argued for years that a lack of federal coordination on ocean policy restricts our abilities to confront a range of problems. Pollution is just one of many issues we must address.

It's absolutely true that we're facing tough economic times and we have to make difficult choices. But we have to make the right choices. My arguments for dedicating funds toward preventing harmful runoff are twofold: health and economy.

We swim in the ocean, we eat fish from the ocean-do we really want human waste flowing into the ocean? Millions of tourists spend billions to be close to the ocean and we rely on the ocean for billions more in industrial output-should we allow toxic runoff to jeopardize that?

We have dozens of agencies tasked with overseeing the ocean, but they rarely communicate or join forces. And we have no national mechanism to iron out policy wrinkles. So our communities-and the ocean-suffer.

"Government coordination" sounds like more bureaucracy, but it's vital bureaucracy. If we have coordination, we have more steady funding. More steady funding means more research, not just on what the problems are but also how to fix them. We must develop better, cheaper technology and target it at the right problems, and we must do it soon.

I've written before about Oceans-21, a bill I introduced in January. It would increase the importance of regional ocean-governance bodies and create a national board to help navigate conflicts. But more importantly, it would establish for the first time a simple policy: if you do something that affects the ocean, you must take the health of the ocean into account.

We've become accustomed to the Clean Water Act and Clean Air Act. We see these bills from the 1960s and 1970s in the news and we know we're better off because of them.

But we have no Clean Ocean Act. We have no policy that says one must consider how an action may affect the ocean. Oversight is an understatement.

It's time we fix that mistake. The ocean will only treat us as well as we treat it. We need to shift

our outlook from short-term benefit to long-term responsibility. We owe it to ourselves and our children to get this right.